

Havdallah at the Reichstag

By Brad Hirschfield

This month marks the 62nd anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. It also happens to fall within eight short weeks of my returning from my first trip to Berlin.

I came to Berlin as scholar-in-residence for the delegation traveling to Poland to re-open the last remaining synagogue in the town of Oswiezem/Auschwitz. Having spent Shabbat together in Berlin, our group gathered in the rooftop restaurant at the newly re-opened Reichstag, seat of the German government for hundreds of years. We were joined that night by acting German President Kurt Biedenkopf, numerous government ministers, and leaders of the German Jewish community.

As it was Saturday night, I had arranged for the reception to begin with havdallah, marking the transition from Shabbat into the rest of the week. With feelings ranging from hope to suspicion, joy to sadness, and excitement to trepidation, I rose before this group as we looked out over the re-unified capital of Germany from the roof of a building that was vital to the Nazi government which had murdered so many millions six decades earlier. Hardly a typical Saturday night for any of us gathered together in that place. In fact, prior to the trip, when I told people where I would be making havdallah in the coming week, they told me I was crazy! Clearly, such an event would have been unthinkable 60 years ago when Jews were so brutally separated from other Germans, or even 10 years ago when a massive wall separated Germans from each other.

Havdallah was the perfect chance for us to reflect together on the issues of separation and re-unification that so animated each of us in that room. Havdallah, as its name conveys, marks a division between one thing and another. It reminds us that differences exist and that they matter. At the same time, havdallah binds together the very things that it seems to separate. As much as it marks the end of Shabbat, it begins the week with a kiddush of its own. Even as we separate Shabbat from the week, we mark our desire to unite them as equally sacred times not by turning one into the other, but by fully experiencing and expanding the potential of both.

Performing havdallah at the Reichstag brought home to me the power and meaning of this practice as never before. There, at the epicenter of the catastrophe that threatened to obliterate the Jewish people, that tore Europe apart, that separated Germany from the nations and East from West, we performed the rite that connects even as it separates. Together we recited the words that dare to articulate our hope that the world can be made whole; that the sacredness of Shabbat, retreat, and particularity can become the sacredness of the week, of engagement with the world, and of humanity.

This rite could not have been performed much before this time. It could not have been performed in a Berlin that was still divided. Nor could it have been performed in a Germany that was not working to come to terms with its past and with the Jewish people. It could not be performed without a community of Jews who understand that building the Jewish people is a part of building human dignity and understanding. Nor could it be performed by people who build their identities based on how they differ from others more than how they are deeply connected to them. Yet here we were, standing with both the acting German President and an Auschwitz survivor, holding the havdallah candle, and reciting the blessing which recognizes the reality of separation and the promise to full unification.

Havdallah invites us to move on, to carry the sweetness of Shabbat into the rest of the week, to move beyond Shabbat without leaving it behind. That havdallah on the roof of Reichstag invited us to do the same and more. Together we sang out the possibility of moving beyond a past of pain, shame, and suffering to new connections, unities, and possibilities that would remember the past without being imprisoned by it.